



PHOTO BY JIM ROBERTSON

Lexington Police Detective James Root

ABBIE DARST | PROGRAM COORDINATOR

Detective James Root has served the Lexington Division of Police for 17 years — the past 12 in the Crimes Against Children Unit. His passion to stand up and provide a voice for abused children, combined with his off-the-wall sense of humor, has enabled him to handle an intense caseload. A father of four children, ages 20, 17, 2 and 9 months, Root has been married to his wife, Kelli for six years. He served in the Army and Army Reserves for 20 years before making the leap to law enforcement. Throughout his career, Root has had his share of funny, interesting, weird and heart-wrenching cases — and he has a story to share or a lesson learned from each one.

Out of nine kids in my family, seven of us are police officers. I have a sister who is a federal agent, and the rest are local law enforcement. Several are retired now; I'm the youngest. My dad was an executive for Chrysler, my mom was a homemaker. Our career choice really has to do with personality. It's the sense of humor — there's the same sense of humor among all my siblings.

I never had any intention of becoming a police officer. I came to Lexington to visit my brother Paul and his wife who were sergeants here. You'd have to visualize my sister-in-law. She's a lovely officer, very petite. I was doing a ride along with her, and there was a disorder call. We roll up and there's a male Hispanic, screaming and yelling with a machete in his right hand and a pit bull on a leash in the left. And I'm going ... O ... K My sister-in-law's squad rolls up and they get this guy subdued. At the time, they didn't have that many Spanish speaking officers — this was 1995. And they're trying to talk to him and it's just utter organized chaos. I'm looking at my sister-in-law and her squad with this guy and I was like, 'I have got to do this. This is awesome. And you're going to pay me to do this?' So I applied.

My wife is a social worker. That kind of happens a lot in our unit. My sergeant is married to a social worker, another detective is, and our old lieutenant is. We all met on the job. There was this case and she said, 'You need to find this guy.' So me and Det. Ball hunted him down and brought him in. He confessed in 10 minutes. We broke him like a twig. She was like, "Good job." And I was like, "Hmmm, I should ask her out."

“It's not about me, it's not about my ego. It's about the kids, bottom line. Always has been and always will be.”

I teach child abuse investigations and suspect interrogation classes. That's fun. Interrogation is so much fun because everybody lies. They lie for the exact same reason that kids lie — to get out of trouble. To read any more into it, there's just not more than that. It's just some people are better liars than others. It's all the preparation before you go in that's important. My classes are really fun because I always have candy and doughnuts. I have rubber bands that I flick at people and I throw things at them. It's not your typical class — no, we have fun with it.

My sergeant knows my preference for old cases. If he sees something that is 10, 20, 30 years ago he'll give it to me and say, 'See if you can do anything with it.' Everybody has their preference for what they like. I like that the commonwealth has no statute of limitations on felonies, especially involving children. We'll come after you, whether today or 60 years ago.

You have to paint a picture for the grand jury when you're explaining old cases. Because if I have a victim who is 55 years old now, that's not my victim. My victim is the 8, 9 or 10 year old little boy or girl inside that person. I don't want to show them this 55 year old woman, who may be a very lovely and nice person, but they need to empathize with and understand that this happened to this child at this time. So sometimes I'll get photographs from the time period of their parents and them, school photos, school records from the time. Then when I present it, people are not visualizing who they see in front of them, but who this happened to and how it impacted their entire life.

We have a saying in our unit that it's about the kids. It's not about me, it's not about my ego. It's about the kids, bottom line. It always has been and always will be.

I have two friends who had been in this unit a long time and went back to patrol. They said, 'You don't realize the stress you're carrying until you leave.' One officer said,

'It's like you're born again when you leave.' But, I enjoy it. I leave work at work for the most part.

To help cope with the cases I see, it sounds really mundane, but I like to work outside in my yard. I'm anal retentive about my grass. I want it to look nice. I put on my little ear phones and sit on my riding mower, and I listen to my music. My wife laughs at me because the neighbors can hear me sing completely off key, and she says, 'You're so weird.' But I'm good with it.

I think I've only had two cases that really put me over the edge, where I just had to say, 'OK, I need several weeks off.' That's not that bad for 12 years doing this. I do follow those cases. I still have copies of those cases in my office. I keep those kinds of cases so when they come up for parole, those files can go with me.

I'm really nosy. I want to know everything, and I love to talk. In patrol you roll up, you secure the scene, take the report and call the detective, but you don't know what happened. Oh no, I'm way too nosy for that. I want to know everything that happened to the victim, happened to the dad, to the mom. I want to know their criminal histories. I want to know what happened when it goes to grand jury and trial. In patrol you just get your little slice. Detectives, though, get the whole picture. Being nosy, I want the whole picture.

People have no clue about what goes on in their own community. They think it happens everywhere else. It happens in the house right next to you. It doesn't happen to economically-disadvantaged people alone. It happens to rich people, to poor people. It happens to Catholics, Baptists. It doesn't matter. You really have to have an interesting sense of humor and personality to be up here for any length of time.

Abbie Darst can be reached at abbie.darst@ky.gov or (859) 622-6453.